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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RPO DUBAI 000543

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SUBJECT: Iran Opposition Hopes Montazeri's Death Will Help The Cause

CLASSIFIED BY: Alan Eyre, Director, DOS, IRPO; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

11. (C) SUMMARY. The December 21 funeral of Grand Ayatollah Montazeri brought tens of thousands of mourners to Qom streets but resulted in no appreciable clash with the substantial security forces turned out for the occasion. Official statements of condolences ranged from perfunctory ones by regime supporters to effusive ones by 'Green Path' oppositionists. There was a noticeable lack of public demonstrations in major cities connected with his death, although some activities in major universities. Security officials continue to keep a significant security presence around GA Montazeri's Qom residence. It is expected that the 'Green Path' will seek to use the seventh day mourning ceremony, falling during Tasua and Ashura holidays, to increase oppositionists turnout on the streets. END SUMMARY.

FUNERAL

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12. (U) According to Iranian and Western press accounts, the December 21 funeral of Grand Ayatollah (GA) Montazeri drew tens of thousands (according to some accounts 'hundreds of thousands') of mourners to Qom. During the ceremony, which started at his house and ended at the nearby Hazrat-e Masumeh Mosque, pro-reformist Grand Ayatollah Mousa Shobeiri Zanjani read the prayers. Although no major violence was reported during the ceremony, which lasted from approximately 0900 to 1130 hours local time, there were reports of scattered clashes between the numerous security officials deployed for this event and mourners, many if not most of whom can be assumed to have oppositionist sympathies. The Montazeri family cancelled the traditional prayer ceremony, scheduled to be held in Qom's Azam Mosque the night of December 21, after it learned that the mosque had been filled in the hours leading up to the ceremony by Basijand IRGC-affiliated persons.

13. (U) 'Green Path' opposition leaders Mehdi Karrubi and Mir Hossein Mousavi attended the service, while former Presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami both sent representatives. Other prominent attendees included reformist senior cleric Grand Ayatollah Yusef Sanei, Former Esfahan Friday prayer leader Ayatollah Sayyed Jalaladdin Taheri Esfahani, former Judiciary head Ayatollah Seyyed Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, former Intelligence Minsiter Ayatollah Qorbanali Dorri Najafabadi, former Interior Minister Ali Akbar Mohtashemi-Pur, Hadi Khamenei (the Supreme Leader's brother), former Tehran Mayor Gholamhossein Karbaschi, and Habibollah Paiman and Ezzatollah Sahabi of the 'Religious-Nationalist' movement.

## ELITE STATEMENTS

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¶4. (U) As is traditional, prominent clerical and political personalities have issued statements of condolences, the content varying based on the writer's political persuasions. At one end was Supreme Leader Khamenei (SLK), who said that GA Montazeri had 'failed a divine test' and asked God to forgive him. Many senior political and clerical figures, to include Grand Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi and Expediency Council Secretary Mohsen Rezai took their cue from SLK's statement. At the other end of the spectrum were the effusive encomiums of 'Green Path' oppositionist leaders Karrubi, Mousavi and Khatami, whose statements explicitly emphasized Montazeri's exemplary clerical and revolutionary credentials, by implication highlighting the force of his criticisms of the current regime. Grand Ayatollah Sistani, presumed to have a significant following in Iran, issued a statement that was short, perfunctory and neutral in tone. Majlis Speaker Ali Larijani's statement was only slightly more effusive, mentioning almost in passing GA Montazeri's efforts in fighting the Shah and establishing the Islamic Republic. The only major political or clerical figure not to issue a statement was President Ahmadinejad.

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## POPULAR REACTION

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¶5. (U) Popular reaction to GA Montazeri's death seemed minimal, with no appreciable mourning-related activities in major urban centers, except for the bazaar in Najafabad, Montazeri's birthplace, which was closed for a day (presumably many aggrieved by his death traveled to Qom to participate in mourning-related activities). Understandably, there was more of a reaction in universities, to include ceremonies at major universities in Tehran, Esfahan and Shiraz.

## REGIME PRECAUTIONS

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¶6. (U) The regime took no chances however, with the Guidance Ministry reportedly instructing newspapers not to put Montazeri's picture on the front page or to print 'inciting' condolence statements. There were also isolated reports of Iranian security officials stopping buses filled with political activists heading towards Qom and taking pictures of the passengers before turning the buses around. Although a Qom province security official boasted that 'not one person' had been arrested during the funeral ceremonies, reportedly at least one prominent reformist cleric associated with GA Montazeri, Ahmad Ghabel was detained by security officials on the way to Qom. And in Qom itself, oppositionist websites are reporting that there is still a heavy security presence around GA Montazeri's home, with pro-government plainclothes and Basij also present.

¶7. (C) COMMENT: According to at least one prominent US-based oppositionist, the 'Green Path' opposition movement is seeking to use the upcoming Tasua and Ashura religious holidays (December 26 and 27) as a 'public referendum that puts millions of people in the streets to announce that they don't want Khamenei.' It is their hope that the seventh day of mourning for GA Montazeri, corresponding to these dates, help them in that end. END

COMMENT.  
EYRE